

# “She Can Read Them by Herself!”: Parents and Teachers Respond to a Kindergarten School-Home Literacy Project

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Literacy scholars have consistently documented the positive relationship between early experiences with books and learning to read (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1994) as well as the importance of home support and book reading practice (Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000). Access to books and other reading material in homes with preschool children often varies resulting in students entering school with a wide range of familiarity with reading and writing (Feitelson & Goldstein, 1986). Some publishers have responded to the need to provide large quantities of early reading texts by developing inexpensive, consumable, easy-to-read series of books that children keep at home and which are suitable for distribution at school.

In this study, we analyze and describe the range of uses and depth of experiences which occurred during the distribution of KEEP Books® in both the home and school environments of kindergarten students in 27 classrooms across three large, urban school districts. In conjunction with the distribution of approximately 37,000 copies of KEEP Book titles to the 633 kindergarten students participating in this project, we analyzed interviews and questionnaires from participating parents and teachers regarding the use of KEEP Books in home and school settings. This data allowed us to identify parents' and teachers' perceptions of the key characteristics of the KEEP Books as well as those contexts for using KEEP Books which contributed positively to family involvement with their children's literacy learning, to early student experiences with print, and to students' confidence and willingness to read.

It is clear that creating access to books and other reading materials for families is essential for early literacy learning, as is providing parents with opportunities to interact with children around texts (McCarthy, 2000). Research on programs such as Books Aloud has documented significant changes in literacy achievement when young children have increased access to books (Neuman, 1999). Morrow (1989) found storybook reading, even just once a week, to be more effective than traditional readiness activities. Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Fernandez-Fein, and Scher (1994) report that there are at least 10 common core characteristics of home environments associated with positive reading outcomes, including the guidance and encouragement of reading by parents, conversation with parents,

ready availability of books for children, and ample space and opportunities for children to read.

Henderson (1987) states unequivocally that the evidence is beyond dispute: "When parents are involved, children do better in school" (p. 1). Children's literacy development grows out of their experiences including the views and attitudes that they encounter within family literacy activities. Through active reading and writing, early literacy learners take on the important semiotic, functional, and linguistic principles which will serve as a foundation to all later literacy learning (Goodman, 1984).

However, the nature and quality of children's early experiences with print, rather than just the quantity of access to books, also contributes to student learning (McCarthy, 2000). Sattes (1985) emphasizes that the impact on student achievement is most evident when parents view their involvement as meaningful and of direct benefit to their children. In order to fully optimize the positive effects of home-school partnerships, educators need to understand the bi-directional nature of home reading engagement:

That is, many studies focus on how parental behaviors affect the child without considering that children's behaviors may affect the behaviors of their parents. We believe that the influences on development are bi-directional: Parents behave in a manner that impacts on children's behavior, which in turn impacts on the parents' future behavior. (Sonnenschein, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996, p. 8)

In order to more fully conceptualize these relationships, this study presents those key characteristics of the KEEP Books which teachers, parents and students identified as important to the ease and confidence with which most students were both willing to engage with the texts and able to do so independently and successfully. Two broad themes emerged through the analysis of participants' responses: factors which made the KEEP Books truly easy to read for even very beginning readers and factors leading to students' sense of ownership of the books themselves and thus, perhaps, of their own literacy learning.

## Method

### *Participants and Materials*

This study was conducted during the 1999–00 school year in 27 kindergarten classrooms within three large urban school districts in the Midwest. The project provided over 48 individual KEEP Books (approximately 1 title each week across the school year) to 633 kindergarten students in addition to classroom copies and 8 enlarged versions of the titles for classroom use. In each classroom, the 24 teachers participating in the study received training and support for introducing KEEP Books as they worked with either the whole class or with small groups of children during guided reading instruction. Then, each child took each book home to keep and read to family members. The project also provided each child with a special container to store the KEEP Books in at home, along with a pad of paper and a marker for writing or drawing activities related to the KEEP Books.

KEEP Books are designed to be appealing and engaging to primary-grade students, and provide opportunities for extended, supported, and independent practice using a wide range of effective beginning reading strategies. The themes of these books include nursery rhymes, folktales, and songs, as well as simple caption books and texts including early sight vocabulary and/or phonetic elements. They are small paperback books with colorful covers and illustrated with black-and-white line drawings. KEEP Book texts are written by experts in early literacy instruction and are purposely inexpensive in order to facilitate the ability of schools to provide many of these books across the year for each student to keep and read multiple times in both home and school contexts.

Each of the schools participating in this project are located within urban, public school districts with a high percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. The schools also participate in a multiyear, K-2 staff development project, the Literacy Collaborative, designed to accelerate student literacy learning (Williams, Scharer, & Pinnell, 2001). A Literacy Coordinator at each school receives intensive training and provides staff development courses and on-site coaching for the school's K-2 teachers. All instructional staff at each school receive training in the use of a literacy framework (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), a conceptual tool to help teachers of young children create, organize, and use a curriculum that supports effective literacy development from the beginnings of schooling. Underlying theories regarding student learning are linked to classroom instructional practices through teacher training in systematic observations of students and using this knowledge to inform instruction on an ongoing basis. The framework requires student engagement in every aspect of reading and writing so that they can build connected knowledge through authentic experiences in using these powerful tools. The development of school-home partnerships in literacy learning is crucial to the success of this literacy framework, and is centered on the KEEP Books.

### *Measures*

Data collected to study the reported uses of KEEP Books in school and home settings included parent questionnaires, teacher questionnaires, and parent interviews. Each parent was contacted and given three options: agreeing to their child's participation in the study, completing a questionnaire and/or participating in an interview. Of the 266 parents who agreed to complete a questionnaire for this study, 81% returned a completed questionnaire in spring, 2000. On this questionnaire, parents were asked to describe the ways children and other family members used the KEEP Books at home, the amount of time their child read the KEEP Books each week and with whom, and how both the parent and the child felt about the KEEP Books.

Through questionnaires, all participating teachers ( $n=24$ ) documented how they introduced KEEP Books to students and their parents, how they used KEEP Books during the year, the degree of usefulness of KEEP Books, student and parent responses to the books, and factors associated with successful reading of

the books. Teachers also noted if any children experienced difficulty reading the KEEP Books.

Additionally, 30 parents (selected from those parents agreeing to participate in an interview and from across the 24 schools) were interviewed by telephone in May and June 2000. Interview data were entered into the computer during each interview in order to ensure accuracy of the recording of parents' comments about the ways their child used KEEP Books, their child's responses to the books, and the ways KEEP Books affected their child as a reader. Parents were also asked if they had any suggestions regarding KEEP Books.

In order to examine and describe the general patterns of student literacy achievement, a sample of students ( $n=48$ ) was selected with a range of Fall Letter Identification (LID) scores from the 24 schools and three districts participating in the project. These students were tested in both September 1999 and April or May 2000 using LID and in April or May 2000 using Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (HRSW), Concepts about Print (Clay, 1993), and an investigator-created Word Test. The Word Test (WT) consisted of 20 high-frequency words presented to students in isolation, and was developed through a content analysis of the 48 KEEP Book titles distributed to all students in the project.

### *Analysis*

The coding and analysis of the questionnaire and interview data was initially guided by a limited number of a priori codes of interest derived from the researchers' review of literature and such research questions as the contexts of uses of the KEEP Books and parent, child and teacher reactions. Using cross-case analysis, answers were grouped together for common themes and perspectives on central issues across all respondents (Patton, 1990). The researchers carried out on going, recursive and inductive analyses based upon grounded theory (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The themes identified within the study emerged through multiple, line-by-line readings of the data, with attention given to the processes, actions, assumptions and consequences of the uses of and responses to KEEP Books reported on by parents and teachers. The researchers specifically analyzed the data for the respondents' own, explicit statements of links between KEEP Book characteristics or contexts of use and student responses. This analysis process was facilitated by a computer program (QSR NUD-IST, 1997).

## Results

### *Patterns of Achievement*

The mean score for the sample of students tested ( $n=48$ ) on LID (54 total possible points) was 24.3 in fall 1999 ( $SD=19.46$ ) and 48.6 in April or May 2000 ( $SD=9.28$ ). The April or May 2000 mean scores for this sample of students were 15.8 on Concepts about Print (24 total possible points,  $SD=3.31$ ), 24.8 on HRSW (37 total possible points,  $SD=11.05$ ) and 12.6 on the WT (20 total possible points,

$SD=6.49$ ). This achievement test data, while not conclusive, points to a general pattern of early literacy learning. A score of 13 on the WT, for example, would indicate an end-of-year kindergarten student who could typically read the following words in isolation: a, I, the, and, to, at, we, see, on, is, can, go, me. A student who scored 16 on CAP would typically have demonstrated accurate left-to-right directionality and one-to-one word-matching.

### *Patterns of Implementation at School*

In their questionnaires, all 24 teachers responded that the KEEP Books were a positive addition to their kindergarten literacy programs. On a scale from 1 (not useful) to 6 (very useful), the mean response from teachers in this project was 5.9, with 88% choosing #6. A typical teacher comment on the questionnaire was: "Our children don't have access to many books at home and we lose many of the books we allow them to take from the room. The KEEP Books are a perfect solution to both problems." Teachers reported that the KEEP Books were used within a variety of whole class, small group, and independent classroom literacy activities. Typical uses included: shared reading, guided reading, buddy reading, Writer's Workshop, teacher read aloud, big books and charts, free reading, homework, free choice activity, and ABC centers. Teachers also reported that the KEEP Books became a classroom resource for such activities as the building up of, and referencing to, word walls, as a resource for specific sight words or context words, learning nursery rhymes, vocabulary or concepts, and as resources for classroom themes or units of study.

### *Patterns of Implementation at Home*

*Contexts of use and responses to the KEEP Books.* A large majority of parents (91% of those who returned questionnaires or were interviewed) responded that the KEEP Books were a positive experience for their children. Overall, parents reported that the KEEP Books were read by their child anywhere from 0 to 120 minutes per week. Only four parents reported that their child did not read the books at all, with two of these stating that their child preferred to read library books. A number of parents commented, particularly through the interviews, that they were not actually sure how much time their child spent reading the KEEP Books due to the amount of self-initiated, independent reading that occurred: "She'll go and line up her baby dolls and read them by herself" (Parent interview, 6/1/00).

It was very clear from all of the parent questionnaire and interview responses that children were reading the KEEP Books within a community of parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, friends, and neighbors. A typical parent comment was:

If I'm in the middle of doing something, I'll say, you can read, I'll work. You sit right beside me. So she sits beside me and reads, holds the book out to show me the pictures, and goes on to the next page. When she first got them anybody that

came in the house had to sit down and listen to her read. You know, a salesperson coming to the door, she'd make them sit down. (Parent interview, 6/1/00)

Parents reported that their child read the KEEP Books on car trips, at restaurants or doctor's offices, during dinner preparation, at the baby sitter's, while playing school, at bedtime or even bath time. One parent stated that their child had "decorated one to give us a present" (Parent questionnaire).

The concerns listed by 9% of parents included a mismatch between the book and their child's ability as a reader (too easy), overly familiar reading material (nursery rhymes), story lines with limited appeal to boys, and simplistic story lines. Out of this group of parents (those with any negative comment(s) at all regarding the usefulness or format of the KEEP Books) only one response did not also include positive comments. One parent, for example, stated that her son did not particularly like the story lines of the KEEP Books and would have preferred more stories about animals or sports. The same parent also stated: "I thought they were very worthwhile. They were simple, but he really liked the fact that they were his, that he knew he had them for himself" (Parent interview, 6/27/00).

*Early success with school-type literacy activities.* Parents identified a number of crucial characteristics of the KEEP Books, which they felt enabled and sustained their child's engagement with the materials, including both the ease of independent reading and a strong sense of individual ownership of each book:

It is nice to have something they feel "ownership" over. She can "master" the books easy since they are not HARD reading and easy to hold, etc. She likes that. They are an excellent literacy incentive—especially for young school children who might not have resources or opportunities for library books or owning their own. (Parent questionnaire)

The degree to which these early literacy materials very quickly became both independently accessible to individual children and personally owned by the children themselves was specifically linked by parents and teachers to an increase in the amount of time children read and reread both the KEEP Books themselves and other reading materials as well. One parent wrote: "These books motivate my daughter to read other 'Big' books" (Parent questionnaire). Parents commented frequently that, because of the ease with which their child could read the books independently, they developed a high degree of both confidence and willingness to practice: "Great idea! This helped my daughter's self-confidence, to know she can already read a whole book by herself" (Parent questionnaire).

Many parents commented explicitly on specific characteristics of the KEEP Books which they felt created an easy, confidence building reading experience for their child with the most frequently cited characteristic being their short length. Parents stated explicitly that this allowed for their child's sustained attention across a whole book. This quick, independent reading of a whole book was emphasized by many parents as being of strong importance for their child's reading success. Other characteristics leading to the ease of independent reading listed by parents included the small, non threatening and convenient size of the KEEP Books, the use of nursery rhymes and storylines which were familiar to their child

as well as the use of decodable words and the repetition of sight vocabulary within each title. Without specific prompting, many parents explicitly connected the text characteristics of the KEEP Books to their child's lack of frustration while reading and willingness to attempt to read independently.

It seems clear from the narratives presented by nearly all parents responding to this study that the KEEP Books became texts that their child could read and reread across multiple contexts. Both the ease with which their child could read each KEEP Book and the sense that these were theirs to keep, read and organize created situations in which children did not necessarily require parent demands or permission in order to practice reading.

Due to the highly scaffolded and very easy nature of the KEEP Books, in addition to each child's sense of ownership, the KEEP Books appear to have connected beginning literacy learners to successful early involvement with school-type literacy activities. A number of parents commented that the KEEP Books provided opportunities for them to participate in their child's new skill learning as well as for one-on-one quality time together with their child: "I take great pride in watching my daughter learn each day, and be able to share it with her father and I" (Parent questionnaire).

The importance of each child's ownership of the KEEP Books was very evident throughout the responses of parents. The KEEP Books are deliberately designed so that children write their name in the book and color the pictures. And, once each title is sent home with students, the books become their own personal property. Parents commented specifically that writing their name, coloring the pictures, and having a special container to organize the KEEP Book titles in across the year made the KEEP Books both more personal and more important to each child. Parents specifically linked this sense of ownership to children's willingness to read and reread the books frequently.

*Engagement with reading skills.* Unprompted, virtually every parent responding to the questionnaires or interviews (94%) stated that the KEEP Books provided opportunities for their child to practice specific reading skills. Parents listed a wide variety of skills they observed their child learning from the KEEP Books, including one-to-one pointing, story telling, nursery rhymes, and coloring within the lines. Learning words, however, was the most commonly mentioned skill. Parents frequently stated that their child was learning "the little words" that were repeated throughout the KEEP Books as well as using the KEEP Books as a resource for writing those words:

She has copied some of the books word for word or will just use some of the books to write words from the story. I think this comes from school. They use journals. She'll write the words she should know by the end of the year. She has a list. (Parent interview, 6/1/00)

In fact, a number of parents specifically linked the child's sense of ownership of the books to a sense of ownership of skills learning as well. A parent stated, for example, that the books "are his to learn from" (Parent questionnaire).

Parents also included comments that indicated that they were concerned with their child's progress over time as a reader: "My son read all the books out loud the other day. It was a pleasure to see how far he has come since the beginning of school" (Parent questionnaire). Parents also frequently compared the reading progress of their kindergarten child with that of older siblings who had not had KEEP Books during their own kindergarten year:

He definitely learned a lot. My other daughter, my other sibling, is twelve and she was not able to do what he could do in kindergarten when she was in first grade. She was difficult, with sight words. He's a year ahead of schedule than my daughter was. I even worked more then with my daughter, and he can even recognize words. I know it helped a great deal. (Parent interview, 6/15/00)

The parents and teachers responding to this study, then, felt that the KEEP Books were a very positive component of each child's literacy program. Their comments indicate that the use of the KEEP Books typically led to successful, independent and multiple readings of whole texts within a wide literacy community. Parents identified key characteristics of the KEEP Books, which they felt enabled their child's engagement with the texts and learning of specific reading skills, including the accessibility, easiness and personal ownership of the books.

### Discussion

The results from this study suggest that kindergarten school-home literacy projects do not necessarily need to be of a complex nature in order to be successful. Baker et al. (1996) ask: "What would a genuine partnership between families and teachers look like if the teacher were not trying to teach or 'train' the parents, but simply to engage them in a literacy triangle with the teacher and child" (pp. 30-31)? This study has identified several key characteristics of early literacy texts, reported by teachers and parents, which can enable and encourage both beginning readers and their families to form partnerships with teachers in support of strong early literacy learning. These key characteristics may be of great help to educators as they select and purchase early literacy materials from the large array of currently available published materials.

The ease with which students were able to engage in both shared and independent readings of the KEEP Books at home appears to have created bi-directional effects, with children willing and able to read and parents then able to interact with their child's growing abilities and thus provide support and encouragement for further growth.

An abundant supply of storybooks can have a strong impact on children's language growth, provided that teachers ensure that the children interact productively with the books on a daily basis:

In many reading programs elsewhere, the control of learning is taken almost completely out of children's (and teachers') hands. Children get too little time to try things out for themselves, to solve their reading problems in real contexts,

and to make mistakes and correct them. (Elley, Cutting, Mangubhai, & Hugo, 1996, p. 2)

Clay (1998) believes that children's early awareness of the complex variety of important components of early literacy learning "arises out of many successful performances or acts, as a result of which children become aware of what works" (p. 46). Parents and teachers in this study reported that the short-length, small-size, familiar storylines, and repeated sight vocabulary in the KEEP Books supported children's engagement in successful literacy performances. This, in turn, appears to have created contexts in which children and their parents could interact around each child's emerging understandings.

Purcell-Gates (1996) found that low-SES parents may view the onset of formal literacy instruction as the appropriate time to begin or increase their own involvement with their children's literacy learning:

The issue is not, thus, getting them ready to learn, but rather creating literacy environments within which the learning that they already do on an ongoing basis includes the different emergent literacy concepts needed for school success. (p. 427)

According to the teachers and parents in this study, easy-to-read, personally owned, inexpensive early literacy texts can be a key component of early literacy learning at school as well as in the establishment of home-school literacy partnerships. At this point, however, a variety of factors supporting the literacy development of kindergartners are inextricably linked and the specific contribution of materials such as KEEP Books to achievement remains unclear. Future research looking more closely at the achievement of kindergarten students over time might provide additional insight into the specific contribution of such school-home partnerships to literacy learning as well as answer such remaining questions as: What are the best ways to introduce such books in school settings? What are the best ways to match books with children? and, What is the relationship between these books and parent-child reading experiences using quality children's literature? Future research on school-home literacy projects that respond to these questions will make an important contribution to our current understanding of early literacy learning.

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